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POST-SCRIPT FROM FILM STUDIES: Whose choice? Watching non-English language films in the UK

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Abstract: In a market dominated by Hollywood, it is easy to overlook that the number of films (and televised productions) which are not in English is actually by far greater than those in English. However, although some non-English language film industries are vast, only a comparatively small number of productions are screened outside of their country of origin. Therefore, before being translated and brought to screens for us to watch, already a filter applies, as the films are chosen by curators of film festivals or the industry. For that reason, films that are perhaps less representative but more interesting, or by a well-known director may be chosen over others that may have been more successful in their country of origin, but are made by a less-well know director or perceived to be less interesting for 'foreign audiences'. The choice of what we watch is thus never entirely ours. Using Japan, Germany and the UK as example, I will offer some thoughts on what impact such a filter might have on the consumption, and therefore the perception, of a film outside of its country of origin and what challenges this poses for audiences and researchers.

Keywords: audiovisual translation, film studies, industry filter, non-English language films

Akira Kurosawa. Miike Takashi. Takeshi Kitano. Which film buff does not know these names? Shinji Higuchi? Hideaki Anno? Junji Sakamoto? Probably a lot fewer people will be familiar with these, although all of them have directed major blockbusters in Japan. Who knows outside of Japan that Takeshi Kitano is more famous in his native country for being a television personality[1] than a director? How Japanese film in the UK is perceived tends to relate to the films of

1 Television personalities are called *tarento* in Japanese. *Tarento* is a loanword from English meaning talent. Based on the old distinction in Hollywood between 'star' and 'supporting talent', the Japanese used the term to create their own brand of television-based celebrity.

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a few directors and may leave out who is setting trends and tone in Japan. A short glance at some basic data will confirm as much: Japan produced 594 films in 2017, only 19 made it into cinemas in the UK in 2017, twelve of which were anime. There is a significant gap between what we are being given and what is actually produced.[2]

While one might argue that Japan is a faraway country, and a perceived lack of cultural proximity might account for the striking difference in what 'they' watch and what 'we' get, another glance at data for Germany, a culturally proximate European country, reveals an even worse picture: only four German productions were released in the UK, two of which were re-releases, for 80 produced in 2017 (Spitzenorganisation der Filmwirtschaft 2018). Film buffs will know Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wim Wenders, and perhaps Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck. But who is Michael 'Bully' Herbig?

In a market 'trapped' in the English language and thus the dominance of Hollywood, it is very easy to assume that the film output of other countries is invariably dwarfed by Hollywood. This is a misrepresentation, as the simple pea-counting exercise above has illustrated. But Hollywood remains the filter through which we watch everything. Not just because we are used to the way Hollywood makes films,[3] but also because Hollywood is a vast industry that decides about the rise or demise of a foreign-language film. Additionally, foreign films very often rely on a partner in Hollywood to get international distribution and thus recognition, as the partnership between Disney and the Japanese animation company Studio Ghibli has illustrated.

In the following, I would like to shed light on the routes of non-English language films to screens in the UK, without looking at translation or the audiences themselves, and contribute to the understanding of what happens before we can even consume something 'foreign'. I will focus on straight-to-DVD releases as much as box office releases and film festivals and on the 'traditional' routes of release rather than on the internet or on television, both different and more complex media which warrant research in their own right.[4] However, it is

2 Japan has had a stable film output of around 600 films per year in the last five years (Motion Picture Association of Japan 2018) and domestic productions mostly outnumber the imports. The UK release data is taken from Film Distributors' Association (2018).

3 Non-Hollywood films are often measured by Hollywood counterparts, for example, the Japanese disaster film *Sinking of Japan* (dir. Higuchi Shinji, 2006) is being advertised as "2012 meets Tidal Wave" on its UK release DVD cover.

4 Content on offer on legal streaming sites such as Amazon Prime, Netflix and Crunchyroll may differ depending on the IP-address of the registered users. Even in a medium like the internet, rights to stream may not be valid across all countries. There are also illegal ways of distribution

important to remember that large-scale film festivals and theatre releases are guided by different considerations than straight-to-DVD releases or smaller independent festivals that rely on outside funding and do not aim for a profit.

One effective way to promote one's film is to aim for an *Oscar*™ nomination, but very strict criteria must be adhered to for submissions. Only one film per country is allowed, chosen by a committee in the country of origin (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences 2017: 16). With the industry itself making a choice for the American jurors beforehand, this often excludes independent film makers. A perhaps more reliable way to get international recognition are film festivals, particularly the renowned ones, as they provide non-domestic audiences with a (selective) window into one's own film industry and culture. However, it is important to be reminded that

> [t]he 'translation' of a foreign film occurs in different ways. First, we can consider the simplest and most frequent act of translation: the act of dubbing or subtitling, although even these techniques might well require reediting for length, and/or censoring. In some societies, for example, sex scenes might be cut, declarations of love toned down in the subtitles, political opinions edited out, and so on. When we see a foreign film with subtitles, we are already seeing another version of the film, not merely just another copy in a different language. (Martinez 2009: 15)

Before the translation of a film even starts, someone, whether the CEO of a DVD company, a curator of a film festival, or a selection committee will already have made a translation of sorts for audiences, by choosing some films over others, one director over another, one theme over another and there will also already have been a decision on which scenes to edit. And that does not even take into account that few film festivals, particularly smaller ones, do not make a profit but are dependent on philanthropical support, as a curator of a film festival confirmed during an interview.[5] Following a film through the official channels (unlike the less official ones on the internet), a complex picture emerges. Screening or release rights need to be negotiated, audiences need to be guaranteed and 'safe bets' might win over films for which a risk might have to be taken. This risk is mediated if the films go straight to DVD, because the income from DVD sales is longitudinal while a theatre release depends on available screens and audience response around the time of release.

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for which content is translated. These films often disappear quickly (copyright infringement usually means they are taken down), and are hence hard to research.

5 Curator of a film festival via e-mail on April 11, 2018. The interviewee prefers to remain anonymous.

What, then, motivates curators and executives of film release companies to choose certain films? As the CEO of a film distribution company said during an interview,[6]

> it comes down to what film I like, unique directors and what companies are easy to work with. Recently, the latter has become the most prevalent, though for directors and films I super super love I try a little more in working with companies I wouldn't usually want to work with. Basically, I could be much more successful taking less risks (*sic*) and releasing more genre-orientated titles, but i (*sic*) guess if you don't have passion behind a release you won't be able to maximise its potential, so better to work with films you love more.

So, the industry in the country of origin is equally important in the journey that a film takes when it travels across the globe. As this quote indicates, some companies might not even be willing to see their films abroad, which accounts at least for some of the stark differences in numbers of films produced and imported to the UK.

Similarly, when it comes to film festivals, the curator I interviewed mentions 'personal relationships' as a crucial factor, stating

> [t]he final film selection depends on how far and wide the curatorial team has been able to 'travel' in its viewing of films. It also depends on whether we decide to have a particular theme for a certain year or whether we are simply showing films. It is easier if there is a theme because then we can search around that. The best curators, in my view, do not only attend other film festivals and film events to watch films but have formed relationships with filmmakers so that they can keep up with what filmmakers are doing and not simply rely on what is currently being screened on the film festival circuit. They also travel widely in the regions from which the films come and try to find filmmakers and work who may not ordinarily submit their work to film festivals.

Both interviewees are acutely aware that their personal input matters when bringing a foreign-language film to 'our' screens, be it through personal preference or their relationship with film-makers and the regional expertise of the curator. Invariably, they act as a filter to what we can then subsequently enjoy. But the filter works both ways, as a willingness from the other side to screen films abroad is equally needed.

And once a choice has been made and films can be shown (sometimes requiring official funding which may exclude more controversial films), it still raises the question as to how well narratives travel. For example, when the Japanese film industry went into decline in the 1960s, Akira Kurosawa required foreign funding for his films as no Japanese studio was able to support his

6 CEO of a film distribution company via e-mail on March 10, 2018. The interviewee prefers to remain anonymous.

flamboyant style anymore. Abroad, he became synonymous with Japanese film, while his domestic audiences were more interested in television drama with its plethora of themes, identities, narratives that never made it here, and rarely outside of the country, as television still tends to be a lot more localised than film. While Kurosawa was perceived as 'quintessentially Japanese' outside of Japan, he was seen as 'too Western' in Japan (Martinez 2009: 7). His focus on (invented) traditional values also arguably shaped 'our' perception of the Japanese – even though people at home did not consider him to be 'that important'. Indeed, the marketing and perception of a 'foreign' (non-English language) film culture rests conspicuously on themes that either stem from or feed into stereotypes, as the familiar, not the unfamiliar, will guarantee audiences.

While curators of film festivals may make conscious choices to avoid certain stereotypes, a choice nonetheless must be made as not everything can ever be screened everywhere. There are also differences between various segments of the international market: a UK release is by no means necessarily available in Germany and vice versa. For example, the Japanese production *GO!* (Yukisada Isao, 2001) has a German version, but no English version. *Sleepless Town* (Lee Chi-Ngai, 1998) has been released in the UK, but not in Germany. With the internet acting as virtual market place, these differences are somewhat mediated, but only if one possesses a region-free Blu-Ray or DVD player and can follow a non-English language film without subtitles, as imported films are not automatically subtitled in English.

In short, the journey of a film prior to its translation is as complex as the translation itself. Before translators can get to work, a decision as to which film will make it with the target audiences has already been taken. Personal relationships and preferences matter almost as much as the 'other' industries and their constraints and peculiarities. It is an intricate network of people that shapes the choices that will be made on behalf of the audiences 'abroad' before they even get to go to the cinema.

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